

William J. Seymour

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William Seymour was one of the most influential African American religious leaders of his time, (River of Revival Ministries, 2004-2016). His impact can be felt even today. Seymour was largely responsible for the establishment of the modern Pentecostal movement. He advocated for racial integration, and he had no objection to women taking leadership roles in the church. William J. Seymour was born May 2, 1870 in Centerville St. Mary's Parish Louisiana. His parents Simon Seymour and Phillis Salabar were both former slaves. Seymour was the oldest in a large family. William Seymour was reared in poverty and suffered the injustice and prejudice of the reconstruction south. Violence against freedom was common and groups like the Ku Klux Klan terrorized southern Louisiana. Leaving the poverty and oppression of life in southern Louisiana, Seymour left his home in early adulthood. He traveled and worked in other states often as a waiter in big cities.

William Seymour was exposed to various Christian traditions. William was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church in Franklin, Louisiana on September 5, 1870 and was later converted in the Methodist Church. In 1900 he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio where he joined the Church of God Reformation movement which was also called The Evening Light Saints. While Seymour was with this conservative Holiness group, he was sanctified and called to preach. Seymour did not answer his call to preach until after he had a fatal bout with smallpox. It left him blind in one eye and scarred his face. For the rest of his life he wore a beard to hide the scars. His recovery from smallpox compelled him to become a preacher. In 1902, he was ordained as a minister in the Church of God. In the next three years, he traveled as an Evangelist, stopping in Chicago as well as Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. In 1905, he settled in Houston, Texas where his family lived. Seymour served as a temporary replacement pastor for

Lucy Farrow, a holiness minister and the niece of Frederick Douglass. It was through Farrow that Seymour would meet Charles Parham, the founder of the Apostolic Faith Movement and the father of the Modern Pentecostal Charismatic Revival. Later that year, he heard the pentecostal message preached for the first time by Parham. Parham had a strong impact on Seymour's spiritual direction and career. That same year, Parham opened a Bible Training School in Houston where he taught that speaking in tongues was a sign of the working of the Holy Spirit. Seymour asked Parham if he could attend the Bible School. Due to strict segregation laws, Seymour was forced to sit outside the classroom in the hallway. The humble servant of God bore injustice with grace. Being a man of keen intellect, in just a few weeks he became familiar enough with Parham's teaching that he could teach it himself. However, he had not yet received the Holy Spirit baptism with the evidence of speaking in tongues at that time. Parham and Seymour held joint meetings in Houston where Seymour preached to the black audiences and Parham preached to the white audiences. Parham hoped to use Seymour to spread the Apostolic Faith message to the African Americans in Texas.

Neely Terry was a guest from Los Angeles that attended one of Seymour's church services. She persuaded a small Holiness church in Los Angeles to have Seymour preach at their church. In February of 1906, Seymour arrived in Los Angeles only to have the message that he was preaching rebuffed. They locked him out of the church. The leadership was suspicious because he was preaching about an experience that he had not yet received. The circumstances did not stop Seymour. He started the Azusa revival as he and a group of people started meeting together often for prayer. Most of the worshippers were African Americans and occasional visits from whites. On April 9th, 1906, many received the Holy Spirit baptism. Hundreds gathered over

the next few days of continuous outpouring. The streets were filled and Seymour preached from the a porch. Quickly outgrowing the homefront from which he held services, Seymour founded their new building at 312 Azusa Street. From this humble location, the Pentecostal truth spread around the world. It attracted thousands of people a day. The revival continued conducting three services a day and prayer meetings twenty four hours a day. Services communicated elements of Holiness teachings, but Seymour had begun to downplay the importance of speaking in tongues. Seymour's mission experienced a rapid decline after 1909. He spent his final years traveling across country. He died on September 28, 1922.

Reference(s):

American Decades, Gale Research, 1998. "Bishop William J. Seymour," 312 Azusa Street,

<http://www.azusastreet.org/WilliamJSeymour.htm> (December 11, 2006).